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(54) **SMART ELECTRIC TAXI PATH CONTROL**

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B64C 25/40 (2006.01)
B64C 25/42 (2006.01)
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(58) **Field of Classification Search**

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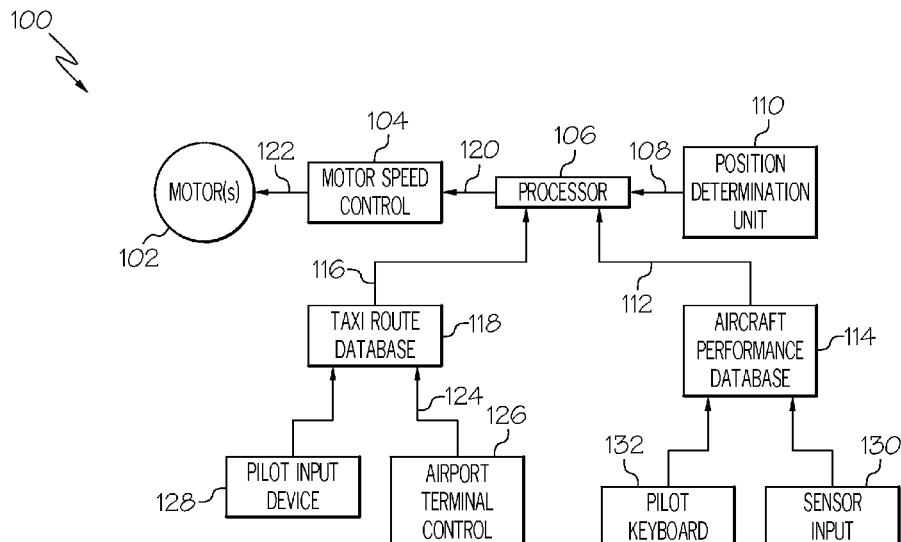
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ABSTRACT

An aircraft taxi control system may include a motor connected to drive a landing gear wheel of the aircraft. A motor controller may be connected to control speed of the motor. The system may also include an aircraft taxi route database, an aircraft position determination unit; an aircraft performance database and a processor configured to a) integrate signals from the aircraft taxi route database, the aircraft position determination unit and aircraft performance database, and b) produce a motor deceleration signal to the motor controller when the aircraft arrives at a predetermined distance from a predetermined location so that the aircraft arrives at the location traveling at a desired speed.

19 Claims, 5 Drawing Sheets



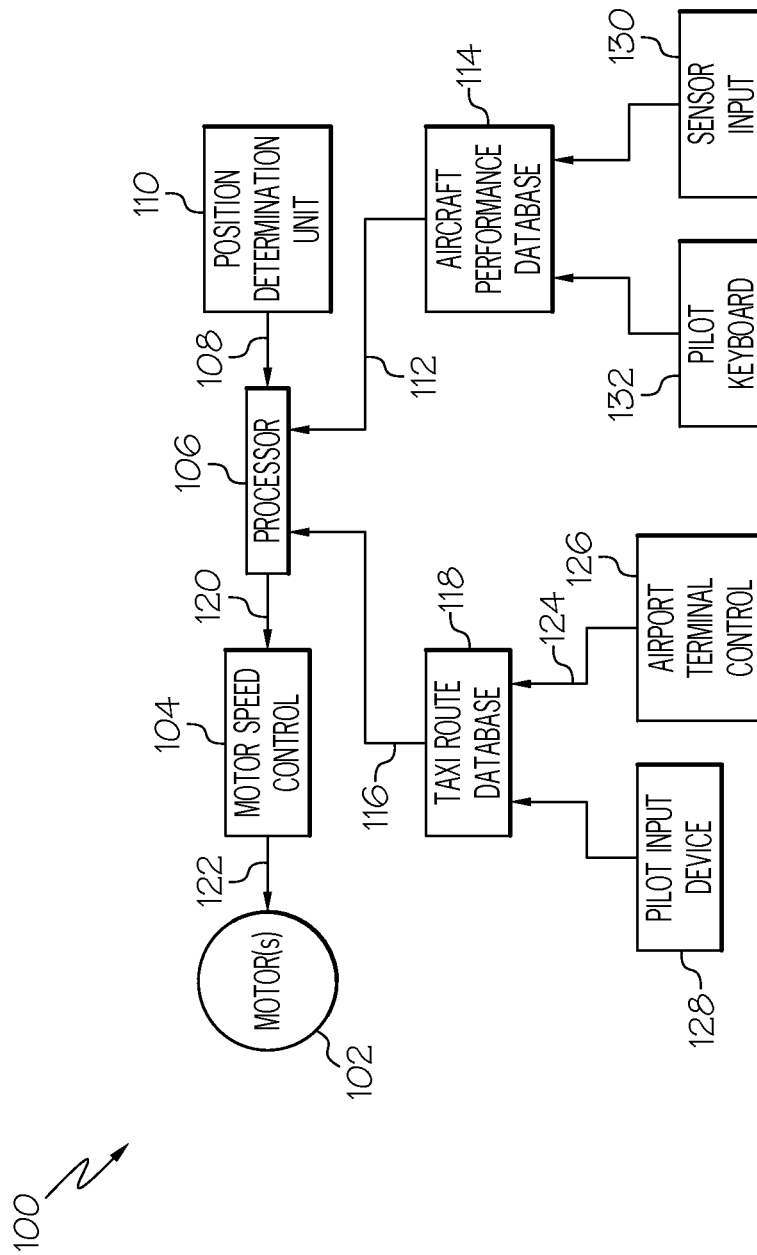


FIG. 1

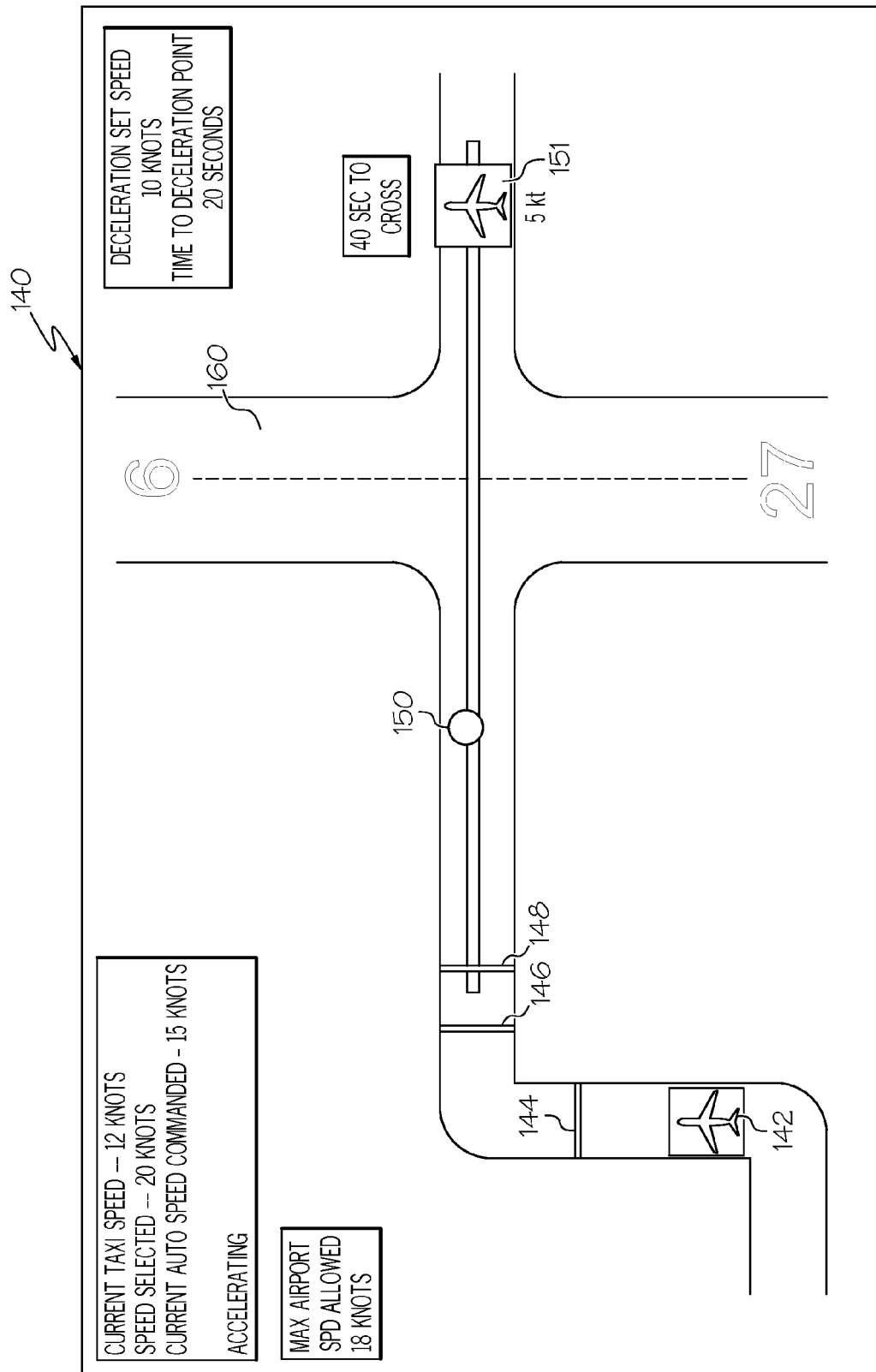


FIG. 2

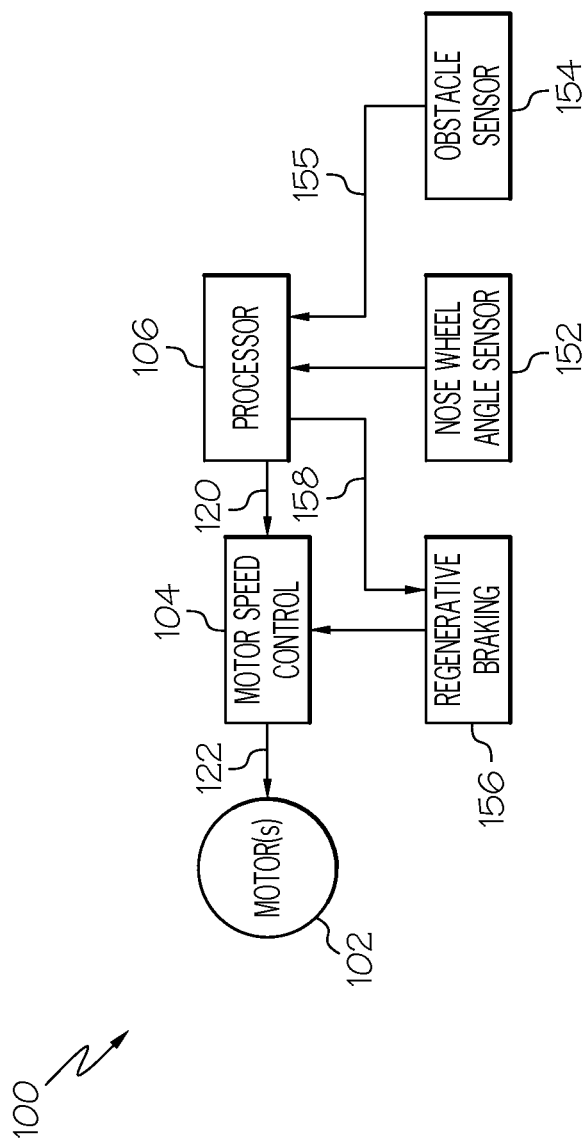


FIG. 3

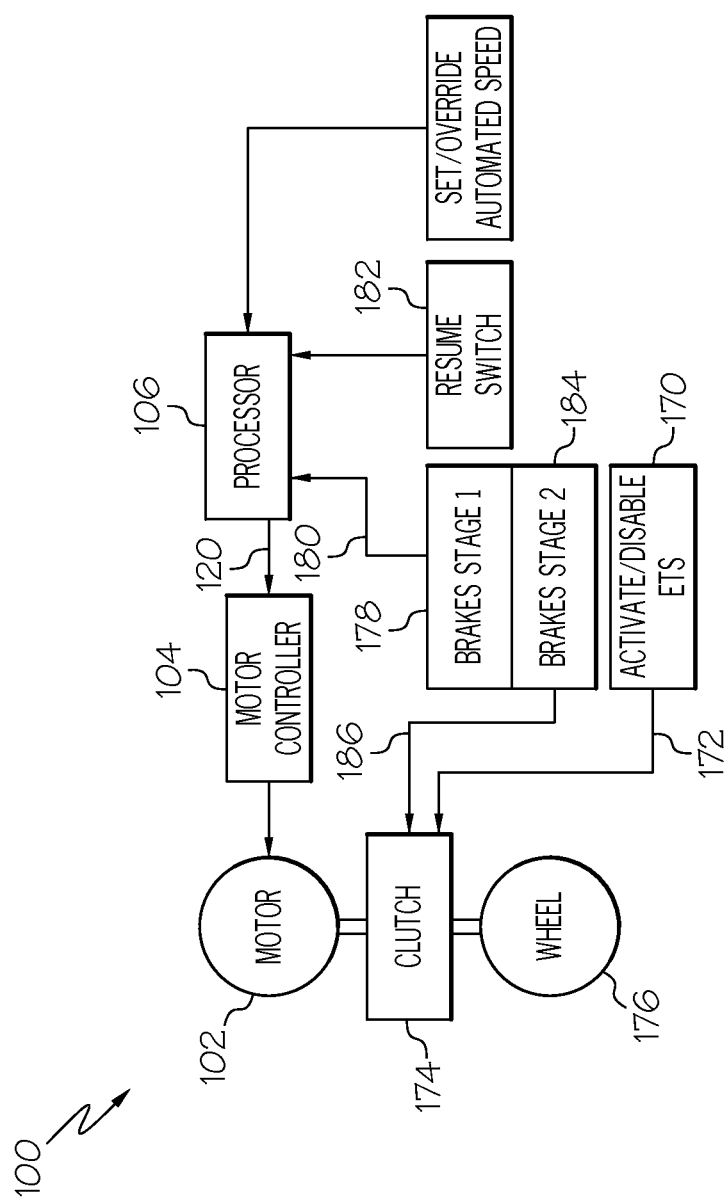


FIG. 4

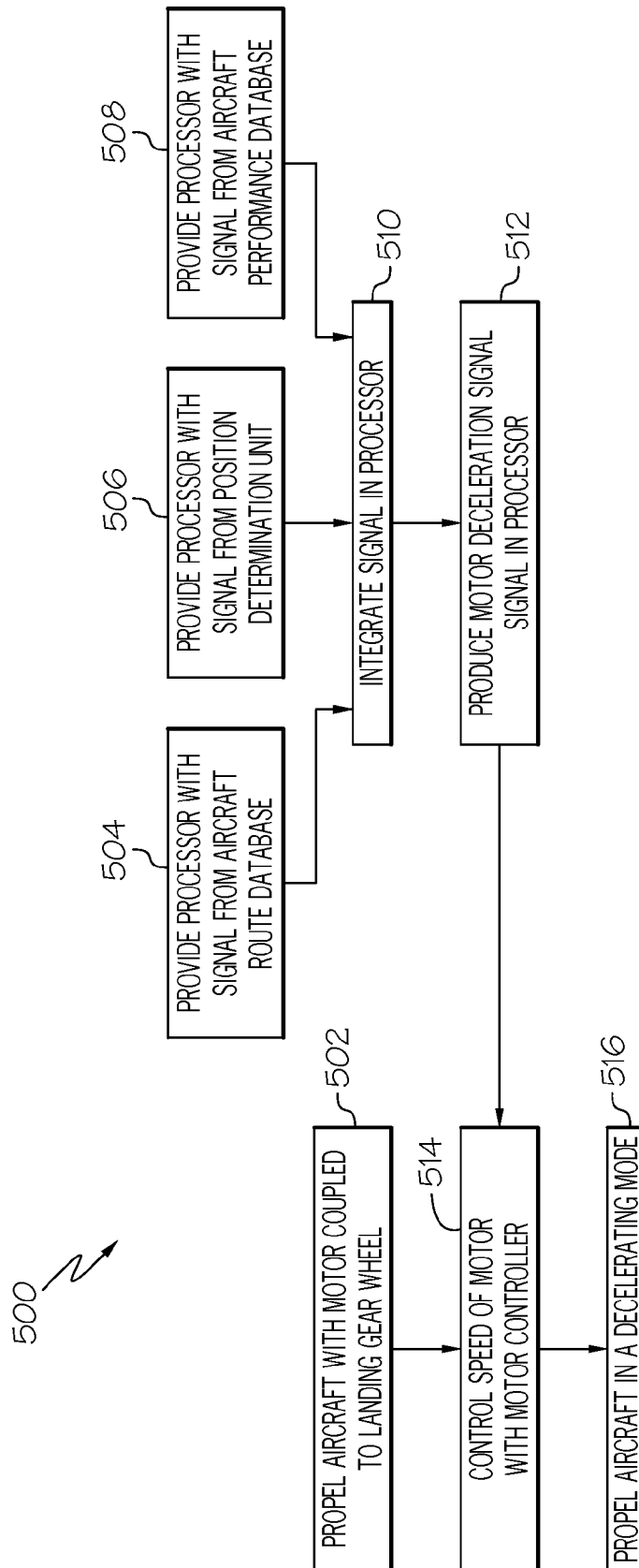


FIG. 5

SMART ELECTRIC TAXI PATH CONTROL

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The present invention generally controlling taxi speeds of an aircraft during ground-based operations. More particularly, the invention relates to automated taxi speed control and guidance systems that may be readily retrofitted into existing aircraft.

Traditional aircraft taxi systems utilize the primary thrust engines (running at idle) and the braking system of the aircraft to regulate the speed of the aircraft during taxi. Such use of the primary thrust engines, however, is inefficient and wastes fuel. For this reason, electric taxi systems (i.e., traction drive systems that employ electric motors) have been developed for use with aircraft. Electric taxi systems are more efficient than traditional engine-based taxi systems because they can be powered by an auxiliary power unit (APU) of the aircraft rather than the primary thrust engines.

In its simplest form, a crew member may manually steer the aircraft during an electric taxi maneuver using a flight deck controller (e.g. a tiller) while looking out a window. In this case, the crew member utilizes his or her best judgment regarding execution of a taxi maneuver. An improvement over this process is provided by a visual guidance system wherein a crew member enters airport parameters such as airport congestion, the visual guidance system determines the best taxi path, subject to airport terminal control (ATC) clearance, and presents it on a cockpit display along with instructions as to the best way to navigate the aircraft along the suggested taxi path; e.g. speed, steering, when to turn thrust engines off and turn electric drive motors on, etc. ATC clearance can include taxi route, assigned take-off or landing runway, hold points etc. and is considered in the calculated path.

While effective, the above described visual guidance system exhibits certain inefficiencies. For example, variations in complying with display guidance instructions, even in the neighborhood of a few seconds, may decrease fuel savings; e.g. a pilot waits a short time before turning thrust engines off. The pilot may execute faster turns than necessary resulting in increased tire wear, or brake more often than necessary causing unnecessary wear and tear on the braking system. In addition, some actions that would increase efficiency are too subtle for the crew to recognize and manage; e.g. optimum acceleration of the aircraft during taxi.

Some automated taxi control systems have been proposed and described in the prior art. Typically such prior systems include features for control of steering and braking of an aircraft during ground operations. While implementation of such systems may be practical when constructing a newly designed aircraft, they have limited applicability for existing aircraft. If such a prior art system were to be retrofitted into an existing aircraft, there would be a need to re-design and modify all of the braking and steering systems of the aircraft. Such a retrofitting would be very costly.

As can be seen, there is a need for an automated taxi speed control and guidance system that may be readily retrofitted into existing aircraft. More particularly, there is a need for such a system that may perform automatic speed control while leaving a pilot to steer the aircraft while at the same time providing display guidance.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In one aspect of the present invention, an aircraft taxi control system may comprise: at least one motor connected to drive at least one landing gear wheel of the aircraft; a motor

controller connected to control speed of the at least one motor; an aircraft taxi route database; an aircraft position determination unit; an aircraft performance database; a processor configured to a) integrate signals from the aircraft taxi route database, the aircraft position determination unit and aircraft performance database, and b) produce a motor deceleration signal to the motor controller when the aircraft arrives at a predetermined distance from a predetermined location so that the aircraft arrives at the location traveling at a desired speed.

In another aspect of the present invention, apparatus for retrofitting an automated taxi control system onto an aircraft with a pre-existing friction brake system, the apparatus may comprise: at least one motor connected to drive at least one landing gear wheel of the aircraft; a motor controller connected to control speed of the at least one motor and the aircraft without employment of a pre-existing friction braking system; an aircraft taxi route database; an aircraft position determination unit; an aircraft performance database; a processor configured to, a) integrate signals from the aircraft taxi route database, the aircraft position determination unit and aircraft performance database, and b) produce a motor deceleration signal to the motor controller when the aircraft arrives at a predetermined distance from a predetermined location so that the aircraft arrives at the location traveling at a desired speed without use of the pre-existing friction brake system.

In still another aspect of the present invention, a method for guiding an aircraft during ground based operation may comprise the steps: propelling the aircraft with at least one motor connected to drive at least one landing gear wheel of the aircraft; controlling speed of the motor with a motor controller; providing information to a processor from; a) an aircraft taxi route database, b) an aircraft position determination unit, and c) an aircraft performance database; integrating signals in the processor from the aircraft taxi route database, the aircraft position determination unit and aircraft performance database, and producing a motor deceleration signal from the processor to the motor controller when the aircraft arrives at a predetermined distance from a turning location so that the aircraft arrives at the turning location traveling at a desired turning speed.

These and other features, aspects and advantages of the present invention will become better understood with reference to the following drawings, description and claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a block diagram of an automated taxi control system for an aircraft in accordance with an exemplary embodiment of the invention;

FIG. 2 is an illustration of a display unit of the system of FIG. 1 in accordance with an exemplary embodiment of the invention;

FIG. 3 is a block diagram of a portion of the system of FIG. 1 in accordance with an exemplary embodiment of the invention;

FIG. 4 is a block diagram of pilot-interface features of the system of FIG. 1 in accordance with an exemplary embodiment of the invention; and

FIG. 5 is a flow chart of a method for controlling speed and providing automated guidance of an aircraft during ground operation in accordance with an exemplary embodiment of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The following detailed description is of the best currently contemplated modes of carrying out the invention. The

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description is not to be taken in a limiting sense, but is made merely for the purpose of illustrating the general principles of the invention, since the scope of the invention is best defined by the appended claims.

Various inventive features are described below that can each be used independently of one another or in combination with other features.

The present invention generally provides an automated taxi control system that may be readily retrofitted into existing aircraft. The system may provide display guidance to a pilot and perform automatic speed control while leaving a pilot to manually steer the aircraft. More particularly, the system may relieve the pilot from a need to continuously perform manual speed adjusting of the aircraft.

Referring now to FIG. 1, a schematic block diagram illustrates an exemplary embodiment of an automated taxi control system **100** for an aircraft (not shown) equipped with or retrofitted with an electric taxi system (ETS) (not shown). One or more electric motors **102** of the ETS may be provided with speed regulation through a motor controller **104** and a processor **106**. The one or more motors **102** may be selectively coupled to drive landing gear wheels **176** (see FIG. 4) of the aircraft.

The processor **106** may be configured to receive an aircraft ground position signal **108** from a position determination unit **110**. Additionally, the processor **106** may receive an aircraft performance signal **112** from an aircraft performance database **114** and a taxi route signal **116** from a taxi route database **118**. The processor may be configured to continuously integrate the aircraft ground position signal **108**, the aircraft performance signal **112** and the taxi route signal **116** and to provide a desired-speed signal **120** to the motor controller **104**. The motor controller **104** may produce controlled power **122** to the one or more motors **102** so that the motors **102** may operate at a speed that corresponds to the desired-speed signal **120**.

During taxing movement of the aircraft, the position determination unit **110** may continuously obtain ground-position data from one or more conventional sources, e.g., GPS data. The position determination unit **110** may be configured to include an interactive map of the airport in which the aircraft may be operating.

The taxi route database **118** may be configured with routing instructions **124** transmitted from an airport terminal control center (ATC) **126**. The taxi route database **118** may include, among other things, information such as gate assignments, taxiways to be used to reach assigned gate, maximum permitted speeds at various ground locations. The taxi route database **118** may be re-configured each time that the aircraft arrives at a particular airport. In an exemplary embodiment, the taxi route database **118** may be adjusted or further reconfigured by a pilot of the aircraft through use of an input device **128** such as a keyboard, touch screen or cursor device.

The aircraft performance database **114** may be configured to include data such as available electrical power from auxiliary power unit (APU), weight of aircraft and maximum acceleration rates based on power availability and weight. Some relevant data may be provided to the aircraft performance database from various sensors **130**, for example sensor that may indicate remaining fuel in tanks. Some data may be pre-loaded into the database **114** and other data may be provided through a pilot input device **132**. For example, a pilot may enter a number of passengers and a weight of cargo and fuel into the database after an aircraft is loaded.

Referring now to FIG. 2 as well as FIG. 1, an exemplary embodiment of a display unit or screen **140** is illustrated. The screen **140** may be positioned in a flight deck of the subject

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aircraft, visible to the pilot, and may be continuously updated as the subject aircraft engages in ground movement under control of the automated taxi control system **100**. The screen **140** may continuously provide the pilot with information relating to relative position of the subject aircraft on the ground and also predictive information relating to expected future behavior of the subject aircraft in response to being controlled by the automated taxi control system **100**. For example, real-time aircraft position **142** may be shown. An indicator line **144** may show how far the subject aircraft may travel forward from the position **142** if the pilot were to disengage the ETS or manually set a desired speed to zero. Another indicator line **144** may show how far the subject aircraft may travel from the position **142** at the current speed and setting after a predetermined lapse of time (e.g., 20 seconds). An indicator line **146** may show how far the subject aircraft may travel from the position **142** at a maximum speed setting after a predetermined lapse of time (e.g., 20 seconds).

A deceleration-point symbol **150** may show a location at which the aircraft may begin decelerating in order to bring its speed to a desired limit so that a particular maneuver may be carried out safely. For example, the subject aircraft may be required to stop or hold before crossing a runway **160**. In that case the subject aircraft must come to a complete stop before reaching the runway **160** because another aircraft, shown by a symbol **151** may be landing. Alternatively, the taxi route database **118** may dictate that the aircraft should turn onto the runway **160**. In that case, the aircraft may be required to decelerate to a reduced speed, but not a complete stop, prior to making the turn. In these cases, the processor **106** may produce a reduced desired-speed signals **120** (i.e., a deceleration signal) to the motor controller **104**.

Referring now to FIG. 3, there are shown some additional features of the automated taxi control system **100** that, for purposes of simplicity, were not shown in FIG. 1. In the exemplary embodiment of FIG. 3, the system **100** may include a nose-wheel angle sensor **152**, an obstacle sensor **154** and a regenerative braking command unit **156**.

The processor **106** may be configured to produce a regenerative braking command **158**, on an as needed basis, so that the aircraft may arrive at a turning location traveling at the desired turning speed. Additionally, the processor **106** may be configured to produce a reduced desired-speed signal **120** (i.e., a motor deceleration signal) to the motor controller **104** if the speed of the aircraft, during a turn, exceeds a safe speed for a sensed nose wheel angle. The processor **106** may also produce the regenerative braking command **158** on an as needed basis so that, during a turn, the aircraft does not exceed a safe speed for a sensed nose wheel angle.

The automated taxi control system **100** may employ the obstacle sensor **154** to control a speed of the aircraft so that a predetermined distance is maintained between the subject aircraft and an obstacle such as another aircraft that may be in front of the subject aircraft. In that context the processor **106** may receive an obstacle-present signal **155** from the obstacle sensor **154** and produce a reduced desired-speed signal **120** prior to reaching the predetermined minimum separation distance.

Referring now to FIG. 4, a block diagram illustrates some pilot operated control features of the automated taxi control system **100** of FIG. 1. A switch **170** may be actuated by the pilot to engage or disengage the ETS. Upon operation by the pilot, an ETS engagement or disengagement signal **172** may be transmitted to clutch **174** so that the clutch **174** may couple or uncouple the motor **102** from a landing gear wheel **176**.

Two brake switches may also be provided for actuation by the pilot. A first-stage brake switch **178** may be actuated when

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a pilot lightly presses, or presses briefly, on one or more brake pedals (not shown) to coast or to prepare to operate friction brakes (not shown) of the aircraft. Such light pressure actuation may provide an automation-suspension signal **180** to the processor **106**. In that case, the processor **106** may produce a signal **120** with a zero-speed value to the motor controller **104**. In that context, the clutch **174** may continue maintaining a coupling between the motor **102** and the landing gear wheel **176**. In the event that the pilot elects to return the aircraft to automated speed control, he or she may actuate a resume switch **182**.

A second-stage brake switch **184** may be actuated when a pilot presses heavily on the brake pedal to operate the friction brakes. Such heavy pressure actuation may result in an ETS disengagement signal **186** being transmitted to the clutch **174**. In that case, the clutch **174** may uncouple the motor **102** from the landing gear wheel **176**.

Referring now to FIG. 5, a flow chart illustrates an exemplary embodiment of a method **500** for guiding and controlling speed of an aircraft during ground based operation. In a step **502** the aircraft may be propelled with a motor coupled to a landing gear wheel (e.g., the motor **102** may drive a clutch **174** that couples the landing gear wheel **176** to the motor **102**). In a step **514** speed of the motor may be controlled by a motor controller (e.g., the motor controller **104** may control speed of the motor **102**). In a step **504**, a processor may be provided with a signal from an aircraft taxi route database, (e.g., the processor **106** may be provided with the signal **116** from the database **118**). In a step **506**, a processor may be provided with a signal from an aircraft position determination unit (e.g., the processor **106** may be provided with the signal **112** from the database **114**). In a step **508**, a processor may be provided with a signal from an aircraft performance database (e.g., the processor **106** may be provided with the signal **108** from the unit **110**).

In a step **510**, a processor may integrate signals from the aircraft taxi route database, the aircraft position determination unit and aircraft performance database (e.g., the processor **106** may integrate the signals **108**, **112** and **116**). In a step **512**, a processor may produce a motor deceleration signal when the aircraft arrives at a predetermined distance from a predetermined location so that the aircraft arrives at the location traveling at a desired speed (e.g., the processor **106** may produce the signal **120** in a deceleration mode when the aircraft arrives at the point **150**). In the step **514**, the motor controller may control the speed of the motor at a reduced speed that corresponds to the signal produced in step **512**. In a step **516**, the aircraft may be propelled in a deceleration mode until reaching the speed that corresponds to the signal produced in step **512**. Likewise the system may produce acceleration control speeds such as when completing the deceleration into a turn.

It should be understood, of course, that the foregoing relates to exemplary embodiments of the invention and that modifications may be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention as set forth in the following claims.

We claim:

1. An aircraft taxi control system comprising:

- at least one motor connected to drive at least one landing gear wheel of the aircraft;
- a motor controller connected to control speed of the at least one motor;
- an aircraft taxi route database;
- an aircraft position determination unit;
- an aircraft performance database;
- a processor configured to,

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a) integrate signals from the aircraft taxi route database, the aircraft position determination unit and aircraft performance database, and

b) produce a motor deceleration signal, based on the signals integrated in step (a), to the motor controller when the aircraft arrives at a predetermined distance from a predetermined location so that the aircraft arrives at the predetermined location traveling at a desired speed without a need for manual speed adjustment by a pilot of the aircraft.

2. The taxi control system of claim 1 wherein the predetermined location is a turning location.

3. The taxi control system of claim 1 wherein the predetermined location is a hold location.

4. The taxi control system of claim 1 further comprising a regenerative braking system wherein the processor is configured to produce a regenerative braking command in addition to the motor deceleration signal on an as needed basis so that the aircraft arrives at the predetermined location traveling at the desired speed.

5. The taxi control system of claim 1 further comprising: a nose wheel angle sensor; and wherein the processor is configured to,

a) integrate signals from the aircraft taxi route database, the aircraft position determination unit, aircraft performance database, and the nose wheel angle sensor, and

b) produce a motor deceleration signal to the motor controller if the speed of the aircraft, during a turn, exceeds a safe speed for a sensed nose wheel angle.

6. The taxi control system of claim 5 wherein the processor is configured to produce a regenerative braking command in addition to the motor deceleration signal on an as needed basis so that, during a turn, the aircraft does not exceed a safe speed for the sensed nose wheel angle.

7. The taxi control system of claim 1 further comprising: an obstacle sensor; and wherein the processor is configured to,

a) integrate signals from the aircraft taxi route database, the aircraft position determination unit, aircraft performance database, and the obstacle sensor, and

b) produce a motor deceleration signal to the motor controller so that the aircraft maintains a desired separation from the obstacle.

8. The taxi control system of claim 7 wherein the processor is configured to produce a regenerative braking command in addition to the motor deceleration signal on an as needed basis so that the aircraft maintains the desired separation from the obstacle.

9. Apparatus for retrofitting an automated taxi control system onto an aircraft with a pre-existing friction brake system, the apparatus comprising:

at least one motor connected to drive at least one landing gear wheel of the aircraft;

a motor controller connected to control speed of the at least one motor and the aircraft without employment of a pre-existing friction braking system;

an aircraft taxi route database;

an aircraft position determination unit;

an aircraft performance database;

a processor configured to,

a) integrate signals from the aircraft taxi route database, the aircraft position determination unit and aircraft performance database, and

b) produce a motor deceleration signal and a regenerative braking command to the motor controller when the aircraft arrives at a predetermined distance from a

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predetermined location so that the aircraft arrives at the predetermined location traveling at a desired speed without use of the pre-existing friction brake system,

wherein the motor deceleration signal and the regenerative braking command are based on the signals integrated in step (a).

10. The apparatus of claim 9 wherein the predetermined location is a turning location.

11. The apparatus of claim 9 wherein the predetermined location is a hold location.

12. The apparatus of claim 9 further comprising a disengagement switch operable by a pilot actuation of the pre-existing friction brake system to suspend operation of the automated taxi control system.

13. The apparatus of claim 9 further comprising a re-engagement switch operable by the pilot to resume operation of the automated taxi control system.

14. The apparatus of claim 9 further comprising a nose wheel angle sensor,

wherein the processor is configured to,

a) integrate signals from the aircraft taxi route database, the aircraft position determination unit, aircraft performance database, and the nose wheel angle sensor, and

b) produce a motor deceleration signal to the motor controller if the speed of the aircraft, during a turn, exceeds a safe speed for a sensed nose wheel angle.

15. The taxi control system of claim 14 wherein the processor is configured to produce a regenerative braking command in addition to the motor deceleration signal on an as needed basis so that, during a turn, the aircraft does not exceed a safe speed for the sensed nose wheel angle.

16. A method for controlling an aircraft during ground based operation comprising the steps:

propelling the aircraft with at least one motor connected to drive at least one landing gear wheel of the aircraft; controlling speed of the motor with a motor controller; providing information to a processor from;

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a) an aircraft taxi route database;

b) an aircraft position determination unit; and

c) an aircraft performance database;

integrating signals in the processor from the aircraft taxi route database, the aircraft position determination unit and aircraft performance database, and

producing a motor deceleration signal from the processor, based on the signals integrated in the processor, to the motor controller when the aircraft arrives at a predetermined distance from a turning location so that the aircraft arrives at the turning location traveling at a desired turning speed,

wherein the motor deceleration signal is produced without manual speed adjusting of the aircraft by the pilot.

17. The method of claim 16 further comprising the step of producing a regenerative braking command in addition to the motor deceleration signal on an as needed basis so that the aircraft arrives at the turning location traveling at the desired turning speed.

18. The method of claim 16 further comprising:

integrating signals from a nose wheel angle sensor with signals from the aircraft taxi route database, the aircraft position determination unit, and the aircraft performance database; and

producing a motor deceleration signal to the motor controller if the speed of the aircraft, during a turn, exceeds a safe speed for a sensed nose wheel angle.

19. The method of claim 16 further comprising the steps:

producing an obstacle-present signal;

sending the obstacle-present signal to the processor;

integrating, in the processor, the obstacle-present signal with the aircraft taxi route database, the aircraft position determination unit and the aircraft performance database, and

providing a motor deceleration signal to the motor controller so that the aircraft maintains a desired separation from the obstacle.

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